

Symbolic analysis of “Waiting for Godot”: Biblical symbols to illustrate absurdity

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Abstract

Symbols add to the richness of plays by adding layers of meaning within the context. "Waiting for Godot", being an Absurd Drama, raises many questions without any answer. It revolves round the common absurd situation of human beings groping desperately for a meaning of their existence. This futility of human existence has been illustrated in this play by the apt usage of symbols many of which have been drawn extensively from the Bible. Samuel Beckett was one of the most influential and renowned writer of the genre of the Literature of the Absurd. All his works are realistic representation of the condition of human beings who, in spite of being fairly rational creatures, are thrown into an absurd, meaningless universe. "Waiting for Godot", for example, projects the absurdity, helplessness and meaninglessness of life in such a form that renounces traditional setting, dialogue form or well-organised plot. To emphasis the meaninglessness of life, the barren background, repetitive dialogue and grotesquely comic behaviour of the characters mark the 'collapsing of reality' which is actually the beginning point of any Absurd Play. An interesting point to note is that, Beckett has strewn his play with Biblical symbols to stress on the absurdity of human condition.

Keywords: Absurd Drama, biblical, meaninglessness, symbols

Introduction

"Waiting for Godot" is an Absurd Drama written by Samuel Beckett to address an essential question about the purpose of human life on earth. Two tramps namely Vladimir and Estragon try to assert meaning of their life by waiting for a mysterious entity *i.e.* Godot who never appears. They wait even though they are uncertain about the confirmation of their appointment with Godot whose identity they are dubious of. Another pair of characters *i.e.* Pozzo and Lucky passes their time by meaningless journey. The endeavors of the characters to make sense of the senseless makes the play grotesquely comic.

The curious fact is that, to enhance the effect of meaninglessness, various symbols have been used quite intelligently which were drawn mainly from the Bible. Actually, the play itself can be called a mysterious play for holding a lot of religious meanings. As verses can be seen in the Bible about God's appearance, "Waiting for Godot" also is concerned about the appearance of Godot whose name has nearly the same pronunciation of God. The messenger boy in this play resembles God's prophets whereas the

tree reminds us of the tree on which Christ was crucified. In this article, all these symbols have been explained with their proper biblical connotations.

Methodology

For writing this research paper, Qualitative Textual analysis has been used. While textual analysis refers to a data-gathering process for interpreting textual data, the qualitative methodology refers to the judgment of the structure and content of a text. The text has been analyzed and the respective religious terms have been compared in this article.

Discussion

"Waiting for Godot" is an Absurd Drama in the true sense of the term. Absurd Drama in particular and the Literature of the Absurd in general assume that human beings are thrust into an absurd situation and thereby the human condition can be represented adequately only in works of literature which are themselves absurd. The word itself has been derived from the contents of the "Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) written by Albert Camus where he said '*In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile...This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity*' (Culik, 1.2000).

Samuel Beckett is one of the most prominent writers of the absurd drama and "Waiting for Godot" projects absurdity and meaninglessness of life. The notion that human beings are rational beings who strive together to build up an orderly and well organized society crashed miserably after the horrors of the Second World War. The idea that a man/woman is actually a singular, alienated, isolated being, emerged and was summed up by various writers who all wrote under the umbrella term, "Literature of the Absurd".

This play describes two tramps waiting fruitlessly for an unidentified person named Godot. The monotonous, boring, uneventful existence is rendered fruitful only by the hope of meeting the unidentified and illusionary person. The play is absurd in the double sense that as well as representing vividly the absurdity of existence the play also negates the conventional form of the traditional drama. That such a drama should use symbols and even that from a religious book like the Bible startles the audience. While the Bible teaches all sorts of positive, moralistic values and ethics, "Waiting for Godot" takes liberally from the Bible different symbols to heighten the effect of meaninglessness and absurdity. The play consists of two acts. In the beginning of the First Act, two characters, Estragon and Vladimir are seen waiting next to a leafless tree set in a desolate setting. From their conversation it becomes clear that they are waiting to meet someone named Godot. The amusing fact is that they are not at all sure about the certainty of the arrival of Godot. While they wait as they do not have anything else to do, they see two other characters passing by. One of them is Pozzo who a slave-owner dragging the other character is

named Lucky who is his slave. Pozzo, trying to assert his superiority, talks to Estragon and Vladimir, makes Lucky dance and think for the duo and takes refreshment. After their departure, a messenger boy comes to tell them that Godot will not come that day but will definitely come the next day. Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave but they do not move.

In the Second Act, Estragon and Vladimir stand beside the same tree which has grown leaves overnight. Again they wait tediously for the arrival of Godot. To pass time, they discuss their past but fail to remember anything clearly as their memory is foggy. Next, Pozzo and Lucky pass by again. Within a single day, Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky has turned dumb. The two tramps tell Pozzo about their waiting, but Pozzo cannot remember that they had earlier met. After the departure of Pozzo and Lucky, a young boy appears to convey the same message about Godot's inability to meet them that day. He is again promising to meet them the next day. The two tramps decide to leave but stand still uncertainly as the curtain is drawn.

To heighten the effect of meaninglessness, certain symbols have been used. Symbols are words, things or events which have deeper and wider significance beyond their apparent meaning. "Waiting for Godot" is full of symbols some of which have biblical connotations. While all the symbols add to the richness of the play, the biblical ones will be explained in this article thoroughly.

Though Beckett refused to interpret "Waiting for Godot" and forbade to assign unintentional symbolic meaning upon his works as is clearly stated in the closing line of "Watt" —"*No symbols where none intended*", it does not mean that no symbolism was lurked.

The audience if they be careful can pick up certain symbols in the play (like that tree, Godot himself and the Messenger boy) which have biblical references. It must be borne in mind that Beckett's early religious education had a tremendous impact on his literary creations. According to Niklas Lovgren, "Waiting for Godot" is replete with religious connotations. Lovgren cited Beckett's words "*Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so naturally I use it*". So he says Beckett was aware of all the symbols which bore religious implications. (Lovgren, 3-4, 2016)

The play has a barren setting save a tree. When at the beginning of the First Act two characters *i.e.* Vladimir and Estragon meet near the tree, it is completely barren of leaves. It is the only living element in the setting and even it is leafless and lifeless. This lifeless tree is representative of the world itself at large which is also devoid of vigour, liveliness and stagnant, and such a world can only harbour meaninglessness and absurdity in the lives of the human beings. The two characters are bound to wait for Godot near this tree as they have been instructed by Godot himself.

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot

Estragon: (despairingly) Ah! (Pause) You're sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (They look at the tree.) Do you see any others?

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead. (Beckett, Act 1, p.7)

This conversation subtly relates the tree to the Bible. According to biblical reference, the Cross on which Christ was crucified was called a tree. So, this leafless tree which mysteriously grows leaves overnight in the Second Act is a parallel to Christ's Cross which is a pious Christian symbol (Asma, 2.2016). Secondly, in Act 1, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the biblical story of the two thieves who were crucified along with Christ. Just after this discussion, they, out of boredom, plan to hang themselves from the tree. This can be seen as a parallel between the crucifixion of the two thieves and the hanging of Vladimir and Estragon.

Apart from the reference of the tree the character of Godot himself is a biblical reference in the sense that Godot himself is a God-like entity. The entire play revolves around the probable arrival of this mysterious character. Martin Esslin, in his essay "The theatre of the Absurd" says that when Beckett was confronted by Alan Schneider about the true identity of Godot, Beckett replied that "*If I knew, I would have said so in the play*" ("The Theatre of the Absurd" 44). Though the identity of Godot cannot be strictly set as critics suggest that Godot is a symbol of a better future, eternal life, meaningful existence or hope, some critics are of the opinion that Godot might represent "God" too. According to Martin Esslin, "*It has been suggested that Godot is a weakened form of the word God*" ("Theatre of the Absurd", 49). Niklas Lovgren says "*The name Godot conjures up an image of God*" (Lovgren 5,19.2016). Another researcher named Jing Wang says that "*Godot is similar to God in pronunciation..... From the description of appearance, Godot has similarities with God*" (Wang, 17.2011). According to what little physical description of Godot is received through the text and the excitement of the two tramps to meet him parallels Godot to God. The two friends hope that "*Godot will bring purpose and meaning*" (Angela Hotaling, 12) into their lives. The impression about Godot has been formed in such a way to equal him to either God or some sort of prophet or a rather patriarchal figure. Just as God is a figure both benevolent and frightening, the two friends wait for the arrival of Godot in hope of getting a means of attaining a better future but at the same time they are afraid about his arrival as has been observed by Esslin: "*(Godot's) coming is not a source of pure joy; it can also mean damnation. When Estragon, in the second act, believes Godot to be approaching, his first thought is, 'I'm accused'. And as Vladimir triumphantly*

exclaims, "It's Godot! At last! Let's go and meet him', Estragon runs away shouting, 'I'm in hell!" (The Theatre of the Absurd, 55). That they are waiting eagerly for Godot, is evident from the beginning. But at the same time, they are afraid of Godot too as is evident when Pozzo and Lucky approach the stage. Both Estragon and Vladimir become awestruck — suggesting religious awe because they are sinners, or descendants of the original sinners. Beckett describes the reaction as follows:-

Estragon drops the carrot. They remain motionless, then together make a sudden rush towards the wings. Estragon stop halfway, runs back, picks up the carrot, stuffs in his pocket, runs to re-join Vladimir. Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait (15)

This passage describes the awe that the appearance of God must arise in the beholder. The physical description of Godot also equates him to God. The messenger boy has seen Godot actually and Vladimir wants to extract exact information from him:—

Vladimir: (softly) Has he a beard, Mr Godot?

Boy: Yes Sir.

Vladimir: Fair or... (he hesitates)... or black?

Boy: I think it's white, Sir.

Silence

Vladimir: Christ has mercy on us. (Beckett, Act2, p.89)

As is mentioned in Holy Bible, "when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow", (Holy Bible, John, 1), the physical description of God is close to that of the mysterious Godot. So, Godot has become for many a critic, a symbolic representation of God himself.

There is another incident implying that Godot is God himself— the incident of the messenger boy. The boy can be said to be a representation of a prophet coming to the mankind to deliver God's message. The prophets, according to religious scriptures are the only ones who have seen God. Similarly, in this play the messenger boy is the only character who has actually seen Godot. Usually prophets are the ones who bridge the gap between God and human beings. They have connection with God Himself, "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;" (Holy Bible, Luke 1:76). This messenger boy has also been in personal touch with Godot. He has seen Godot, knows him and comes to Vladimir and Estragon to convey his message. Not only once but on two occasions he brings messages from Godot. So, there are points of similarity between a prophet and the boy. So, the messenger boy can be perceived as another example of the religious connotation that "Waiting for Godot" held, even if unintentionally by the dramatist himself.

If the usage of language is examined, it can be seen that here too, Beckett has manipulated language to serve his religious purpose. Here, in this play, the religious names like Adam, Cain, Abel, the reference to the story of Jesus' Salvation, the four gospels add to the religious connotations of the play. Vladimir and Estragon playfully begin to sort out names:-

Estragon: To try him with other names, one after the other. It'd pass the time. And we'd be bound to hit on the right one sooner or later.

Vladimir: I tell you his name is Pozzo.

Estragon: We'll soon see. (He reflects.) Abel! Abel!

Pozzo: Help!

...Estragon: Perhaps the other is called Cain. Cain! Cain! (Beckett, Act 2, p. 80)

When Pozzo asks Estragon what his name is, Estragon replies that he is Adam, probably meaning that he is the fallen man, bowed down by the original sin which is making him suffer terribly, leading him to his deplorable condition.

Conclusion

As has been discussed, "Waiting for Godot" has many biblical references even if not explicitly. It must be remembered that Beckett was a writer who never admitted to have used any straightjacket symbolism for his works. Throughout the play, the audience faces several questions without any answer. When asked, Beckett did not give any interpretation, but chose to leave it to the consideration of the audience. As Esslin writes, "*It was expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors*" (The Theatre of the Absurd, 20). On another occasion, Beckett negated the idea of using religious symbols in "Waiting for Godot", "*I told [Ralph] Richardson that if by Godot I had meant God I would have said God, and not Godot. This seemed to disappoint him greatly*" (Samuel Beckett to Barney Roset, 18 October, 1954). So, according to Beckett, no religious symbol was used deliberately in "Waiting for Godot". But the fact remains that the tree, Godot himself, the messenger boy all hold religious stories to enhance the religious connotations to such an extent that both critics and the audience cannot but feel the biblical touch that the play holds. In short, "Waiting for Godot" is spread on such a broad spectrum that it holds lots of symbols, both religion and secular.

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